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National Institute on Aging

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High Blood Pressure: A Common But Controllable Disorder

If your doctor tells you that you might have high blood pressure (HBP), you may be surprised, since you probably have no obvious symptoms. But it is encouraging to learn that there are simple ways to control the condition and bring blood pressure (BP) readings down to safe levels.

What is HBP? As blood flows through the heart and out to the blood vessels, it creates pressure against the blood vessel walls. Your BP reading is a way of measuring this pressure, and it tells you if the pressure is normal (normotensive), high (hypertensive), or low (hypotensive). Thus, another name for HBP is hypertension.

BP readings are given in two numbers, such as 120/80. Although the average BP reading for adults is 120/80, this does not necessarily mean that a slightly higher or lower reading (for either number) is abnormal or unsafe. Lower BP readings (for example, 110/70) are normally considered safe for most people. For older people, many experts feel that readings as high as 140/90 are acceptable. Once the BP goes above this level, however, some form of treatment should be considered.

When your doctor takes your BP reading, he or she may want you to stand, sit, or both. The BP test is painless and takes only a few minutes. The doctor should take several readings on different days before deciding if your BP is too high. All of these steps are necessary because BP changes so quickly and is affected by many factors, including the normal feelings of tension during a visit to the doctor.

It is estimated that 60 million Americans may have HBP. About 40 percent of whites and more than 50 percent of blacks over the age of 65 suffer from some form of HBP. Because this disease is so common, everyone should have a BP test once a year.

Although some cases of HBP are caused by other illnesses, these cases account for only about 5 to 10 percent of the total number of patients with HBP. This kind of HBP is referred to as "secondary hypertension." In patients with this form of the disease, it may be possible to cure the HBP by treating the original medical problem. Most HBP, however, cannot be cured, but can be controlled by continuous treatment. These cases of HBP fall into the category known as "essential" or "primary" hypertension. The causes of primary hypertension are not known. But most experts agree that there are some things which increase a person's risk of developing HBP.

It appears that a person is more likely to have HBP if someone else in their family has the disease. Also, HBP is more common in blacks than in whites, and it tends to be more severe in blacks.

Other possible risk factors include obesity (overweight) and diets high in

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salt. All of these possible causes of HBP are being studied, and a common opinion is that a combination of many factors may be responsible.

The name "hypertension" should not be mistaken as describing a condition found only in tense people or during periods of tension. BP will go up in all people during periods of stress or increased physical activity. Yet you can have HBP even though you are usually a calm, relaxed person.

The good news about HBP is that for most people it can be controlled by drugs and sometimes by changes in daily habits. The type and severity of a patient's HBP, as well as his or her other medical problems, will determine which drug, or combination of drugs, is used.

People with HBP sometimes stop taking their medicine because they didn't feel sick before they started taking the pills and the drugs may cause unpleasant side effects. These side effects usually disappear or become less troublesome after a few weeks. If not, a doctor should decide what steps to take.

Another problem is that some patients incorrectly believe that once BP is brought down to normal levels, the medicine is no longer needed. If your doctor has prescribed an antihypertensive drug, it probably means that you will need to take the medicine for the rest of your life, although the amount you take may be reduced. However, this is a small price to pay for a healthier, longer life.

If your doctor decides that you have only mild HBP, he or she may recommend that you lose weight, eat less salt, or get more exercise. It may be possible to lower your BP simply by making these changes in your daily habits. If your doctor decides that drugs are needed to control your BP, he or she may suggest that you also follow these guidelines on weight reduction, salt intake, and exercise.

If you or people you know have HBP, you can help control the condition by remembering these facts:

- ☐ People with hypertension may not feel sick, but hypertension is serious and should be treated by a doctor.
- ☐ BP can be lowered with medicines, but it will rise again if the medicine is not used. If one day's dose is missed, do not "double-up" the next day. Instead, call your doctor for his or her advice.
- ☐ Try to take your medicine at the same time each day, for example, in the morning or evening after brushing your teeth. This will help establish a regular and easily remembered routine.
- ☐ Ask your doctor any questions you have about the treatment. It is important to understand why and how treatment is given.
- ☐ Weight reduction, reduced salt intake, and exercise may be helpful, but only as recommended by your doctor. Do not assume that these actions are substitutes for drugs unless your doctor *specifically* says they are.

HBP can lead to many serious conditions in older people, including stroke, heart disease, and kidney failure. But because many advances have been made in the last 30 years in treating HBP, you can reduce your risk of developing these problems by getting proper treatment if a BP test shows that you have the disorder. Tests should be done by a doctor or nurse or at a health clinic. If HBP is diagnosed, you should closely follow your doctor's advice.

For more information on HBP, write to the High Blood Pressure Information Center, 120/80 National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md. 20205.

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